

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

Elizabeth Buckley Curtis

An interview conducted on

December 13th, 2023

Interviewer: Dr. Allison Huntley

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“William and Don Griffis Vietnam War Oral History Archive”

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HUNTLEY: Alright, um, so, this is, uh, Dr. Allison Huntley here with, um

CURTIS: Elizabeth Curtis.

HUNTLEY: Thank you. Elizabeth Curtis. Uh, the date is December 13th, 2023. And it is 2:35 pm. Um, so, uh, first we're gonna start with some questions. You've already seen the questions

CURTIS: Mh-hmm.

HUNTLEY: But, we're gonna start with some questions about your background, and then shift to some questions about your military service, your return to civilian life, and then just some follow-up questions about your military service.

CURTIS: Okay.

HUNTLEY: So, we'll just start with the first question there. So, if you'll just give us your name again.

CURTIS: My name is Elizabeth Buckley Curtis.

HUNTLEY: Thank you. And then, when and where were you born?

CURTIS: I was born in Ap- in Vicksburg, Mississippi in April of 1953. And I grew up on Army Posts all over the- mostly the East Coast although my Dad was stationed in Okinawa when I was a toddler. And he was stationed in Panama Canal Zone when I was in high school so I graduated from high school at Balboa High School in Panama Canal Zone.

HUNTLEY: Oh, wow.

CURTIS: In 1971.

HUNTLEY: Mh-hmm. Is there anything that- we can go ahead and think now if there are things - anything you would share about being in a military family in- during the period of the Vietnam War.

CURTIS: Well, when the Vietnam War was going on, my dad was stationed in Vietnam in sixty-five I think it was. I'm not sure. Um, but, at the time I was in sixth grade and I didn't really understand the concept of what war was. I knew that my mom and grandparents were very worried about him being over there. And my mom would watch all the news reports both hoping she would see his face and hoping she didn't. Because if she did, there was a good chance that there was something bad happening that would cause him to be shown on tv. Um, he used to send cassette tapes to us. And he would read us stories and stuff like that. [laughs] He had a field manual when he was over there- he was in the Green Berets and he was- [background chime] he was, um, there as a consultant teaching the Montagnards guerilla tactics, which was probably, um, not really necessary because I have a feeling that they knew how to do guerilla tactics better

than anybody in the military did for their area. Cause let's face it, they lived in very primitive conditions and they knew how to get around in the forest without, uh, without being heard or seen, so, I'm putting my thing on temporary mute, so. [laughs] Anyway, he had a field manual about the Montagnards and what kind of life they lived and so on. And he'd read us chapters out of that and we were fascinated by it. And when he came home we all wanted to see the book. [laughs] And we were so disappointed when we saw it because it was an Army manual. The pictures in it were just photographs, grainy, black and white photographs, and it was lots of writing and no pictures. And he would read it in such a way that it sounded exciting. These people sounded like neat people and it was just a disappointment to see it was just an Army manual, y'know. [laughs] Just wasn't fun.

HUNTLEY: So, when you say we, uh- How many brothers and sisters?

CURTIS: I'm the oldest of five.

HUNTLEY: Okay, so two sisters and the rest are brothers?

CURTIS: Yeah, two sisters, two brothers. And we were all born approximately two years apart.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: So it's- at the time my youngest brother was nursery school age- kindergarten age. We used to laugh because the sister who was just older than him, he and she were the only ones at

home while the rest of us were in school and [laughs] my sister would come to my mom and say, um, 'Robert wants a cookie and I want one too'.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: My mother used to laugh and say, 'I didn't even know Robert could talk until Georgie went to Kindergarten. [laughs] But that's, you know, just family life, y'know.

HUNTLEY: As is your right when you have a younger sibling. [laughs]

CURTIS: Yeah, yeah.

HUNTLEY: Yeah, um, okay, uh, so when and where did you enter the Armed Forces?

CURTIS: I actually raised my little right hand and swore my life away in 1981. I think it was probably in March in Little Rock, Arkansas. But I didn't report for duty until June 6th of 1981 and I reported to the Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: Um, and that was, I got my commission on October 1st of 1981. And from there I went to Dayton, Ohio for some training for a bit. And I had a little bit of leave time and I went down to Panama for my first duty station.

HUNTLEY: Okay, um, and then, so you went in in 1981 and then what was the end of your years of service?

CURTIS: October of 1985.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: So I only served two full tours. There was some training, temporary tours for training in there.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But only two tours. It was one of those things where I joined because I had been fascinated by the military since I was a kid.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And I don't even remember when I started being fascinated by it, but, you know, you grow up on an Army base, you see people in the military, you go to military hospitals. At that time, they had military hospitals on most of the bases and you got to see women in the military too. And, so I knew that was a possibility it was never a surprise to me and, so I decided I was wanting to go in the military and I was going through a period in my life where I wanted to make

a change. Things were not going the way I wanted them. I needed to get a complete break from what I was doing into something completely different.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And so I decided the military was the way to go.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And my dad, bless his heart, sat me down and he said, 'are you sure you want to do this?' And I said, 'yes'. And he said, 'well, I'm gonna tell you something and you're probably gonna think it's odd but I- if you wanna join, I will back you.' He says, 'but I know your personality is enough like mine that you're probably not going to like it. So don't go in with the idea of burning all your bridges. Go in and try it and maybe you'll surprise me. But I have a feeling you won't like it as much as you think you will.' He says, 'and I'll tell you this too. If you join the Army or the Marines, I'll disown you.'

HUNTLEY: [laughs] And he was in the Army.

CURTIS: [laughs] I said, 'why? You're in the Army.' He says, 'yeah, but I know how the Army and the Marines treat their women and I don't want my little girl being treated that way, the Navy and the Air Force treat their women better.'

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And so I said, 'okay.' And by that time I had already been talking to various places and the Navy had the best offer so I went to- I went Navy.

HUNTLEY: Okay

CURTIS: Besides they have the coolest uniforms.

HUNTLEY: They do. Don't they?

CURTIS: They do.

HUNTLEY: And then, what was your educational, professional background before going into the military?

CURTIS: I had gone to college. I had a bachelor's degree in Speech Therapy and Audiology with a minor in English and a minor in Spanish.

HUNTLEY: Okay. And where was that?

CURTIS: Um, I started school at a little private school in Memphis, that at the time was called Southwestern at Memphis. It's now called Rhodes College.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And I went there for two years and then I transferred to the University of Arkansas.

HUNTLEY: Okay

CURTIS: Because my dad was getting out of the military and at that point because all of us were so close to each other's ages- I was in college, my brother was getting ready to go to college, I had a sister that was coming up to college pretty soon and my dad was gonna go to law school.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So at one point in time, there were four kids in college plus my dad.

HUNTLEY: Oh.

CURTIS: Five of us going to the University at the same time.

HUNTLEY: Were you all at Arkansas?

CURTIS: Mhm-hm.

HUNTLEY: Oh, wow. Okay.

CURTIS: Yeah, and my dad bought a house that was within walking distance so he wouldn't have to buy cars for all of us.[laughs]

HUNTLEY: Clever guy. And then, kinda circling back, do you know his years of service?

CURTIS: Uh, he went to West Point.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And in fact, if you look in there, I've got stuff from me, my grandfather, my dad, and my husband in there. So, my dad went to West Point and he graduated in 1952... and let's see...

HUNTLEY: Did he already, um-

CURTIS: When he graduated from- from West Point. Um-

HUNTLEY: So we're looking at a Life Magazine.

CURTIS: A Life Magazine.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: In 1951 there was a big cheating scandal at West Point. My dad was on the honor committee.

HUNTLEY: Oh-kay.

CURTIS: And he is the one holding the paper in his hand right there.

HUNTLEY: Okay

CURTIS: Handsome devil.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: Anyway, he was one of the honor committee. At that point in time, West Point didn't have women in it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: The men were not allowed to be married. And, um, they would get one leave a year, I think, in the summertime. And that's how my mom and dad met. They met in 1951 and they got married after he graduated in '52.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And then I was born in '53.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So, it was- it was a good career for him but he really didn't like it that much. By the time he figured out that it really wasn't for him, he already had a wife and five kids and the economy was not in that great of shape- but that's him getting his bronze star.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: In '65. And this is my mother's father. He was a chaplain in World War II as part of Patton's Army in Europe.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And then this one. I'm not sure why this is there but since he was a chaplain and this is an Easter service it was 1943 so I'm thinking this was some- something for the troops.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: In Europe. But I don't know.

HUNTLEY: Okay. And that's him giving the service.

CURTIS: I'm- I'm assuming he's one of the people up here on the top.

HUNTLEY: Oh okay.

CURTIS: 'Cause he was a chaplain.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So I'm assuming he's one of the people on the stage.

HUNTLEY: Okay, yeah.

CURTIS: It was on, uh, a collection of photographs my mom put together on a CD.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: And all it says is Easter 1943.

HUNTLEY: Okay, yeah.

CURTIS: And it looks like the kind of thing that I would see, except there's a kid in there- in the audience someplace.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: So I'm not sure what that's all about.

HUNTLEY: Hmm.

CURTIS: But um, anyway, my dad was in the military. He started in '51 technic- no, '52 because that's when he received his commission and graduated from West Point and he served until '72.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And he served two tours in Vietnam. First was in '65 and the second one ended when, um, ended in '71 I believe or seven- yeah it ended just before Vietnam fell.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And he got- he served his last tour in San Antonio.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And then went to Law School at the University of Arkansas. And, so that was him.

HUNTLEY: Um, and then, for you, which military conflicts did you serve during?

CURTIS: Well, there weren't really any major conflicts but at the time Nicaragua and El Salvador had some major tensions going on.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Partly because Nicaragua had gone through a civil war or was in a civil war. I don't remember which it was.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Daniel Ortega, a socialist, was coming into power or at least rattling sabres at the time. And the US was supporting El Salvador. I remember that while I was there was a Navy Officer that was assigned to the Embassy in San Salvador that had to go someplace in town. And he got in the Embassy Limo or car or whichever it was and they're driving through town and the air conditioner played out and he rolled down the window and somebody came and shot him in the head through the open window.

HUNTLEY: Oh.

CURTIS: So, we were warned don't go into the city in your uniform. Do not travel inside Central America in your uniform. Be on the alert.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. And that was when you were stationed in Panama.

CURTIS: That's when I was stationed in Panama, but, uh, I never had any problems there. Um, the invasion of Grenada while I was in- in Panama and the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut happened while I was in Panama.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Other than that, there weren't any major conflicts but [laughs] there was a girl, she- she was a good friend of mine at the time. She was a teacher at the American school in Honduras and she- was she had joined the Navy reserves so that she could get Navy benefits and so she had to serve her time every now and then and she would come down to Panama to serve her time [laughs] to get paid and all of that stuff. And one time, she got on the bus in Honduras and she [laughs] rode the bus all the way through Nicaragua and down to Panama wearing her Navy uniform the whole trip.

HUNTLEY: And she never-

CURTIS: And she didn't have a single problem, you know. And when she got down there everybody's going, 'what were you thinking?' and she says, 'it was a nice trip, what's the big deal?'

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: [laughs] Just- she could get away with stuff like that. I- you know, I would probably have been very nervous even thinking about it. But she- she talked about, um, going river rafting on the river that formed the boundary between part of the countries and there were guerillas fighting in the area but they were river rafting, y'know.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: [laughs] O-kay. But, anyway, that's the only conflicts I served during.

HUNTLEY: Um, and then what units did you serve in?

CURTIS: In Panama my first duty sta- Panama was my first duty station and I served first as the international affairs officer was my official title. And I worked out of an office in the Navy's school for small boats operation.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And the military at that time had schools- the Army had one, Air Force had one, Navy had one- where we trained people from Central and South America in American tactics and various things and we ser- and we trained them in there so everybody in that particular part of the department if you would go by a civilian terms, in that department everybody in that department had to speak Spanish so I could speak some Spanish, I had a good accent 'cause I had learned it in Panama but my vocabulary and grammar were not great but I could make do. So I served there as international affairs officer. Funny thing was, that office hadn't been filled in so long, they didn't even have a job description for it, [laughs] and they weren't used to having women in military uniforms there so we kinda made it up as we went. And I ended up doing a lot of, um, escort officer duties for visiting dignitaries. Where I would escort them from place to place, I would act as a tour guide if you will, um, I would arrange for their quarters, where they were gonna stay, where they were gonna eat. I would schedule any events they needed to go to. Stuff like that, um, and I would give briefings to, uh, people that were coming in and it was always kinda fun when the visiting dignitary was an admiral from one of the countries in South America or Central America because those countries at that time, if they even allowed women in the military, they were always in admin or nursing positions. Period.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: To see a woman in a mil- US Navy Uniform, wearing- lemme get one of these pictures.

[shuffling] You see that little star there?

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: That indicates that if I were properly trained-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: I could be in command of a ship.

HUNTLEY: Oh-kay. That star there on the sleeve.

CURTIS: Yeah, and if you look at my grandfather's insignia, [pause] his insignia is a cross.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: So he was a chaplain.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Okay. I don't have a picture of my dad that shows his insignia very well but he wore one that, um, was crossed rifles- infantry. My husband-

HUNTLEY: Okay, I see.

CURTIS: My husband is, um, his is crossed sabres-

HUNTLEY: Oh, okay

CURTIS: - and that was calvary.

HUNTLEY: Oh, right.

CURTIS: Okay, so if I were in the Navy and I didn't have that, I would have some- something else, usually, like a caduceus for- for medical or something. My brother served in- in the Navy

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And he wore a caduceus but that tiny little star would get the admirals going.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: They'd get this look on their face, like, I don't believe what I'm seeing.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: And then I would stand up there and I would always try to look my very most

professional and I would give them the briefing and I would speak in good Spanish and I was very respectful to them like you should be if they outrank you and if they asked questions, I would say, 'that's a very good question and I'm gonna let Chief so-and-so do that because that's his department and he deserves the- to be able to tell you about his department.'

HUNTLEY: Right.

CURTIS: The truth was I wouldn't have been able to answer the question anyway.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: But it- it made it look like we had a very cohesive teamwork kinda department and it solidified the idea of forming a team rather than just bullying people because you have a higher rank.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. Yeah.

CURTIS: And the very idea of a woman being part of that team, and being showed the respect that the chiefs and so-on showed me.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: It just did wonders for transforming the way they thought. Maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. Yeah.

CURTIS: So, I guess in a way, I was kinda ground-breaking but at the time I didn't think I was.

HUNTLEY: Yeah. The benefits of having hindsight, right?

CURTIS: Yeah. Yeah.

HUNTLEY: Um, okay-

CURTIS: So-

HUNTLEY: Oh, sorry.

CURTIS: I did that and then I went from there to the US Military Entrance Processing Station in Memphis, Tennessee. MEPS for short. And it was in downtown Memphis.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And that was the place where you raised your little right hand and it- it was a neat place to work in a lot of ways because we had people from all the services there.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Because if you were gonna be joining the Army, you needed to be speaking to Army personnel who would fill out all the paperwork properly.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And same thing for Navy or Air Force but you all went through the processing at the same time, at the same place. You all had your physicals done by the same doctor. All of that stuff was all done as much as possible by whoever was qualified and I was at first the admin officer, so I was just doing administrative stuff for the whole thing and then later I became the operations officer so I was the one that had to inspect the fingerprint chart, cards, and actually say the oath for everybody that got sworn in.

HUNTLEY: Okay. And that's- that was at the end of your service.

CURTIS: That was the end of my service.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: By that time I had figured out that I really didn't wanna be in the military as a career, I had met my husband by then. 'Cause I had met him down in Panama.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And he was Army and I was Navy and it was kind of interesting. But, [laughs] um, anyway, that's where I served and I got out of the Navy in October of '85.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. Um, okay, so kinda going back to the beginning. So, why did you enlist?

And then, what was your training like? You said a bit about why you enlisted but if you wanna-

CURTIS: I enlisted mostly because I was interested in it and I knew I'd kick myself if I didn't try it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, I knew that you didn't have to enlist for life.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And you could try it and get out. And I figured if you're tough enough you can- you can last for four years. And if you're not, they usually will let you out.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: But I just needed to get out of the place where I was at the time. I needed a change so I- I tried it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: The training was interesting. Um, I had been told that it was gonna be a combination boot camp and officer training. So I was gonna be learning all the stuff that you learn in boot camp but it wouldn't be as rigorous as boot- as boot camp was, um, because I was going to be needing to learn a lot more academic stuff. Um, the academic stuff was not a problem for me. But I've never been all that athletic so all of the physical stuff was really tough. Um, but there were times when it was fun and I had a blast doing parts of it. Um, almost flunked the physical- the physical test at the end because I couldn't run that fast. [laughs] So, I did flunk it on the first try. Had to take a second try, and a couple of my, uh, a couple of people in my company that I was good friends with-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Purposely flunked when they saw that I flunked the- the running part. They purposely flunked on the situps and the pushups part. And so, the three of us went through at the same time and we made a big deal out of helping each other through the parts that were tough on. Uh, the run was a mile and a half run and there was one part of the run where there were no proctors on

it. They picked me up and carried me part of the way to make sure that I would pass the test and I did. [laughs] But, um, once that was done I didn't have any problem. It was interesting because in the training part of it, I was going through at the top of the range- age-ranges that you could go through OCS at the time.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So I was one of the oldest people there. And in order to pass, I had to finish the, um, the run and I want to say it was in fourteen minutes but I don't remember what the actual time was but that sounds good. So, it's like fourteen minutes or something like that and I- I had a great deal of difficulty passing that. Soon as I graduated and I had that little gold bar on my shoulder, it went to like eighteen minutes.

HUNTLEY: Oh. [laughs]

CURTIS: And I'm sitting there going, what is the deal here? You know, so it was a lot easier after that.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But, it was- it was different, y'know I learned a bunch of stuff that actually I never used but it was nice to know.

HUNTLEY: So for the physical training part, did they separate people out by like age or gender or anything or was everybody?

CURTIS: Everybody was at the same time. You had to do the test at the same time.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Wait a minute, they did separate it by gender.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: Guys had to pass the run faster than the girls.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And I think they had to do a little bit more of the situps range in the other tests that they did. I don't remember for sure what the requirements were.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And while I was still in the service they changed the whole physical fitness part.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Around so.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: The requirements changed before I left anyway.

HUNTLEY: Um, okay, so, to the next que- oh, uh, with regards to the language, did you have to do any Spanish language training or you went with what you had going in?

CURTIS: I went with what I had going in.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: I had been, um, in Panama-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: for three years when I was in High School.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And Balboa High School didn't let you graduate unless you took a foreign language.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And at that time, they offered Spanish, German, and French.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And I thought I'd be really stupid to take German and French in a Spanish-speaking country.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: So I took Spanish and it made sense because at that time, um, the only English language that you heard on the radio was from Armed Forces Radio.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: [laughs] At that time, Armed Forces Radio is- is gearing its programs for all of the military service members and families that are serving down there. So they would have a block of time for Country and Western, they'd have a block of time for Rock n Roll, they'd have a block of time for Classic, a block of time for political, a block- you know. All of that and you could count on when your block of time came up, and for some strange reason they kept playing the Beach Boys and Mamas and Papas during the time when we were in school.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: [laughs] So if you wanted to hear it, you'd listen to the Panamanian stations because those- those songs were popular all over the place. You got to hear a whole bunch of machine-gun fire Spanish, it was that fast. But you got to hear the songs that you were used to but you also got to hear some good Latin songs too.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: So, that's the way it was. And I'm not sure where that came from. [laughs]

HUNTLEY: Oh. This is kind of a me question but, uh, when you listened to US music in Panama was it in English or was it in Spanish?

CURTIS: It was in English.

HUNTLEY: Oh, okay.

CURTIS: Yeah, they would- they would introduce it in Spanish.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And then the song would start, y'know.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And so if you- depending on how well you could speak Spanish-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: You could say, oh the Beach Boys are coming on, y'know. Or it's- it's, um [pause] there was a Panamanian artist that we kept hiring for the dances at school because he was just so much fun.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And if it was him on there I would listen to his stuff too. But that's the way people were. And I got- I got really good with the accent.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Because I had a really good Spanish teacher and she pointed out some of the finer points of Spanish pronunciation.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And she- she said when you pronounce this word do not say this this way or they'll know you're a gringa. Okay?

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: [laughs] And so, I would practice that and she- she fine tuned the ohs and the ahs and the des and so on, and it was- it made a difference in the way I speak it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Of course I haven't spoken it that much since then, but-

HUNTLEY: Um, okay, so, looking at the questions- question seven.

CURTIS: Mh-hmm.

HUNTLEY: So what conceptions did you have, um, of the United States at the time of your enlistment? Um, what did America symbolize to you? What did you think it stood for?

CURTIS: I have always been very pro-America.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Always. To me this country is the greatest country in the world.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: It's the first country that was founded on the idea that all people should be equal.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And granted, that's not how it's worded. It says, "All men are created equal" but that's the way people talked back in those days. The word men stood for humanity as a whole and I grew up believing that and I still believe that. This country has problems, yes. It always has.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But it's created by humans not by God. May have been created based on religious principles and I believe it was but it wasn't created by God. He didn't just suddenly say the United States of America exists and this is the rules and it's gonna be that way. Humans make mistakes and we make some of the most horrendous mistakes and some of the stupidest mistakes that can ever be made. And as long as that happens, it's not gonna be perfect. I still think and I probably will until the day I die that this country, in spite of its mistakes or maybe sometimes because of them, we're still the best and I believe that we always will be. Because we do stand

for individual freedoms. We do stand for each pe- each person being equal as far as the rights they're given, the responsibilities that they're given. That is equal in this country. At least by law. It might not be practiced that way as much as it should be but that's what the law says.

HUNTLEY: Right.

CURTIS: And this was the first country that ever did that. In the entire history of the world, how could it not be a great country?

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: You know, and it's- it's founded on those principles and we have learned through time what our mistakes have been in the past and we've worked towards fixing them.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But, when you're talking human history, it takes a while for some things to be corrected. And I think that we're in the process of changing things and some of those changes I think are gonna be really good.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Some of them, I think, are gonna be very painful.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And it- I don't anticipate living to see all those changes be completed.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Y'know so, and I'm sure that before I die there will be some more that come along- that's gonna happen, you know. But I still think that we're the best.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. Um, so-

CURTIS: So that answers eight too. [laughs]

HUNTLEY: Yes, so no- so no change. So, uh, since your time in the military has your conception of the United States, it's-?

CURTIS: It has not changed.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: If anything I'm more loyal to it than I was before.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Especially since I served overseas.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. Do you think that your like, hm, do you think that your growing up in a military family- do you- and living in different places-

CURTIS: I think that had- I think that probably had an importance on it, yes. Because, um, I grew up with grandparents that were from the South.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: From the Deep South.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And from South- from the Mid South and the Deep South. And they grew up in a completely different time zone- time era.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm

CURTIS: My grandparents- my dad's parents were born in 1898.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm

CURTIS: My grandmother remembered the first car driving through town.

HUNTLEY: Yeah

CURTIS: She remembered that the first time she got onto an airplane, she was telling everybody she knew she'd gone on an airplane.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: And she wore high heels and white gloves to get on that plane. She wanted to know she was going someplace good.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: You know, my other grandmother remembered the first time she saw a- a car drive through her hometown.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, they both had stories that were so different from what I grew up with that I just grew up with this sense of history but for that era.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: For that part of town. They- they both had, um, black people who helped them out.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: They were servants that they paid.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, and those servants had family members that had served as slaves.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: I don't know that they served as slaves for my family or not but they had been slaves, um, the whole idea of black and white relations was totally different-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -when I was growing up, from what it is now.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: I can remember Martin Luther King. I can even remember the Freedom Marches and so-on. I was young enough when it started that I honestly couldn't figure out what was the big deal.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Because when I was growing up, there was a lady that- she was my grandmother's cook. Her name was Lizzie.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Best cook in the world.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: I mean that woman could cook anything and it tasted wonderful. And she would babysit us kids. And my- my other grandmother had a lady named Zadie who helped out with housework and gardening and stuff like that and lived behind the house and she had helped raise my dad.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: We loved both of those women.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Like they were family.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: And I could not imagine why anybody would be up in arms over- over blacks versus whites what's the big deal, right? I grew up loving black people.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: At least those specific black people, I didn't know that many, but-

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: -the ones that I did. We had a very loving relationship.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Um, so I didn't remember- I didn't remember why people were so upset at the time.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Now reading about it now, yeah I can see why people would be upset. Why people would be marching and fighting and so-on, but at that time, it didn't register with me.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: But, I don't know where we started on that one, either.

HUNTLEY: Just your conception of the United States.

CURTIS: Yeah.

HUNTLEY: Um, and yeah, you bring up a good point, that er- hm, you bring up a point that geography can play a- like places that changed a lot and that might give you different perspectives.

CURTIS: Yeah, yeah, and it came- it came more apparent as I got older. I got more knowledgeable about things. [laughs] One of my best friends in high school was from New York City,-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -and she was Jewish.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: [laughs] And it was always funny to talk to her because her concept of the world was all based on big city life.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: New York City.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Mine was based on small town Middle America, and the concepts were completely different. I remember her dad was just craving bagels. He hadn't had a good bagel since they left New York and there was no such thing as a good bagel in the Commissary. So her mother wanted to learn how to fry chicken and my mother wanted to learn how to cook bagels so it was a learning process for both of them. The Jewish lady learned how to cook bagel- cook chicken not by measuring but by smelling and feeling and all of that. [laughs] Which is how my mother learned it 'cause that's how Lizzie taught her.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Then the two of them got together on the bagels because Mrs. Weiser had never made a bagel. She had just gone around the corner to the bakery where you got 'em.

HUNTLEY & CURTIS: [laugh]

CURTIS: You know, so they got every bagel recipe they could try and they tried bagels and the two husbands were the ones that judged whether you had it right or not. And finally my friend's father said, "you got it right, it goes down and sits like a good hard lump right where it's supposed to." [laughs] I still got that recipe someplace.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: But, y'know the whole idea of how we view the world is different based on where you grew up.

HUNTLEY: Yeah

CURTIS: My husband grew up in the deserts of Arizona. And he was used to going up and down the mountains like a stupid goat, y'know. He could get anywhere. But I didn't grow up in that kind of thing. I can remember the first time I saw the desert thinking, how could anybody think this is beautiful. [laughs] But I grew to love it.

HUNTLEY: Um, the desert is tricky like that.

CURTIS: Mhm-hm.

HUNTLEY: Um, okay, so you said, uh, it asks about where you were deployed overseas-

CURTIS: Mhm-hm.

HUNTLEY: Um, while you were deployed overseas, uh, did you reflect much on your unit's mission and how much you believed in it?

CURTIS: I don't remember reflecting on anything back then, really.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, I did think that our mission was, uh, a good mission for international relations.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But I could also see how somebody could say, 'are we sure it's such a good idea to teach them our tactics,' you know but these were just things that were done back in the day and I'm sure they're still being done. It's a way of maintaining international relations with your allies. And you wanted these people to be allies and you wanted them to be able to work with

you so yeah it made sense but I can see how somebody that had not done any work with the military would say that's not a good idea. I think it was, but-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: At the time, I don't remember reflecting that much on it. I just said, 'yeah, okay, there's something that needs to be done, and, yeah, I'm gonna do it.'

HUNTLEY: Um, and then, did you, uh, what did you think of local inhabitants that you encountered?

CURTIS: I loved them. I thought they were fun to be with. Um, but then I had the advantage over a lot of people that I worked with because I had been in Panama before.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: I had been there as a military dependent which is basically a civilian.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And I got to know a few Panamians. I got to see Panama from the civilian side and from the military side and I just loved it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: It's a beautiful country and I wouldn't mind going back there for a visit sometime.

HUNTLEY: Do you think that compared to when you were a kid and then as an adult in the military did you have any different perceptions?

CURTIS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I was there in high school before the treaty was signed.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: To give the Panama Canal back to the Panamanians.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And when I got down to Panama as a military member.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: It was after that treaty had been signed.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And a lot of this stuff had been turned over.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: The base that I lived on when I was in Panama as- in high school. That base had been turned over to the Panamanians.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: For the most part. Um, it- it was interesting to see the difference in the way the Panamanians ran things and the way Americans ran things. But, um, I, I got the impression when I was there in the military that there was more anti-American sentiment than there had been when I was there as a dependent.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: It may be that that anti-American sentiment was there when I was a dependent and I just wasn't aware of it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But we arrived there when I was a dependent during the time that Omar Torrijos was conducting his coup.

HUNTLEY: Oh

CURTIS: And our base was directly across the Bay of Panama from Panama City.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: We could go out along the edge of the- of the Bay and watch the flares from the guns going off.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: In the city, and my mother would say, 'get away from there', y'know, and it's a good long ways and we're not gonna get shot from those. They're shooting this way, they're not shooting this way. But it was still nerve-wracking to her because she's- she understood the political implications of it. We were just watching the fireworks. [laughs] But there was a coup going on.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: And so she knew it was dangerous. And it wasn't until that coup settled down and things got kind of under control that she ever ventured into Panama.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And once we did, we found our favorite stores. We would go there. There was a fabric store that, ah man, that place was a sewer's heaven. Sewer's heaven. Absolutely. And one of the first places that I went to when I got back down there in the military.

HUNTLEY: [laughs] Is it still there?

CURTIS: Yeah, and the salesman who used to wait on us was still there and remembered me and my mom. But, um, it was just a really neat place to be.

HUNTLEY: Yeah

CURTIS: And they- the interactions that I had with the Panamanians were always very good. I never had a single time that it was bad. I do remember that when I was there in the military, um, there was a visiting naval officer, um, I don't remember what he was doing down there. He was- he was just down there on temporary, um, I had taken him down to a restaurant in Panama City and he liked it and he wanted to go back down there and he got turned around. It was very easy

to do- got turned around and ended up in the bad part of town. And he ended up in a- in a fight and ended up in a hospital because he got stabbed.

HUNTLEY: Mmm.

CURTIS: But, you know, that can happen in any city.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: If you get in the wrong part of town, it can happen anywhere. So I'm not sure if he was attacked because he was American, because he looked hispanic.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And he had a Spanish last name and he had- he spoke Spanish like a native. So I don't think that was it. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

HUNTLEY: Right.

CURTIS: So I don't think it was as anti-American as some people claim it was and is. I don't think that's the case at all.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: I think most people just treated you like they wanted to be treated for the most part. And if you treated them that way, you were gonna be friends.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: You know.

HUNTLEY: Um, okay, so, what, um, and I guess, discuss what you think their conception was of the United States. Um, did you ever have any conversations with the local inhabitants about the U.S.?

CURTIS: [laughs] Yeah, there was, there was an archipelago of islands on the Atlantic side of the- of the isthmus-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -called the San Blas islands.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: The people lived there are the Kuna Indians. And they, at that time and I think still, were very much anti-Panamanian.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Because they viewed the Panamaians as people that were trying to conquer them as a people but they liked the Americans and so quite a few of them worked on the American bases and stuff. When I was down there in the military, my husband took me to San Blas islands. And you got in this dinky little plane and you fly from Panama City across the isthmus, land on the only island in the archipelago that was large enough to have any kind of airstrip.

HUNTLEY: Oh, wow

CURTIS: And the plane is so small that you could see through the cockpit windows. So when he's approaching, he's taking a nosedive like this and you can't see the island, you just see the ocean.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: So if you're in the seats in the back, you're going [breathes in sharply] [laughs] but he lands on the island, and when he comes to a full stop and you get off the plane there's only about ten feet in front of the nose of the plane before you're off the island.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: You get greeted by this Kuna Indian and he's got a dugout canoe with an outboard motor and-

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: you load up in that and he takes you to the next island over which is where your hotel is. And your hotel was built by a Kuna Island who had worked for Americans all his life. And how he was retired on his own island. And he had his own plot of land on the island. Now, remember the island is only six inches above sea level.

HUNTLEY: Wow.

CURTIS: Okay. So he's got this plot of land and it's rectangular shaped, basically. So right here, he's got, um, a long, he's got a concrete block building here. And then, he's got what they called a boheo [spelling unsure], which is like a gazebo here. And then, over here he's got the bar.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: Along here, he's- he's got an L-shaped hotel that's two stories high. The foundations and the floors are concrete but everything else is- is woven bamboo and stuff. The walls between the rooms are ten feet high but the ceilings are twelve feet high.

HUNTLEY: Oh.

CURTIS: So, if you wanted to and had the means to do so, you could look over the wall into the next room and since it's just woven grass or whatever they use, you can see through the cracks if you really wanted to. In between, along here, he's got chunks of rock and coral that sunk into the ocean and so the swimming pool is actually ocean water and it's kept clean by the- the motion of the waves.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: It's also where you stored the dinner. So your lobster was in there. [laughs]

HUNTLEY: [laughs] The swimming pool?

CURTIS: Turtles and he turned into a swimming pool. We got to talk to him one night and he's telling us about how he came to have this hotel. He had worked for Americans, he loved Americans, he wanted to have Americans come and visit his- his- his country as he called it because Americans were good people and they brought good money. [laughs] Okay, fine, and he says, so when he was still working for the Americans, he asked Americans what do you look for in a good family hotel that you would take your whole family too. And he said they told me that you needed to have private rooms, and you needed to have a private bathroom. The rooms should have a queen sized bed or a king sized bed. Um, there should be a restaurant where you can eat your meals without having to go someplace else to get 'em. It would be nice to have a bar but the

bar should not be in the same place as- as the restaurant. Um, because, you don't want to take your family past a bunch of drunks, y'know. Um, so- and it would have a swimming pool. So he had all of that.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: [laughs] He had that- that concrete building. It was the only building in town that had a generator and a refrigerator so you could have ice in your drinks. It connected to- it had a kitchen in it. It connected to the boheo [spelling unsure] which is where the dining room was.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And it was picnic tables with the wildest assortment of garage sale chairs you ever saw in your life.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: Around the picnic tables. And then the hotel downstairs, he had a seashell business. Upstairs was where you stayed. But remember you're only six inches above sea level so getting water pressure to all those individual bathrooms was non-existent and it used sea-water to shower.

HUNTLEY: Uh.

CURTIS: Oh, that. If you flushed your water- flushed your toilet nobody was gonna be able to use the water for an hour. But it was neat to get in the swimming pool because if you aimed your camera just right you could pick up a couple of the lobsters and hold them up in the picture and it looked like you picked them up out of the ocean.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: You know, it was really a neat thing. But that was his conception of what America was like. He translated into what was available to him and he created the American hotel. [laughs]

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: But a lot of people seemed to think that all Americans were rich. Um, and they seemed to think that we all thought that we were better than everybody else because we were American. They seemed to think that we were a little stuck up but if you got past that, we weren't bad people. For the most part. That seemed to be the attitude that most of them took with me.

HUNTLEY: Hmm. Yeah.

CURTIS: That's- I think that's what we project.

HUNTLEY: Um, okay, so did you receive any special medals or recognitions for your service, such as a Purple Heart and if so could you explain the circumstances?

CURTIS: I didn't get anything for, um, combat stuff because when I was in military women weren't allowed in combat positions.

HUNTLEY: Right.

CURTIS: In fact, I think that Congress had just signed a law that allowed women to even be assigned to ships shortly before I went in.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And out of the two hundred women that were going through OCS at that time or during that year, I think there were only ten positions for women on ships.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So, combat was out of the question for me. I did get a joint service, um, meritorious award, what was it....what did I get... I had a marksmanship award. Let's see. Pictured here.

HUNTLEY: Oh, how nice.

CURTIS: And I had the Joint Service Commendation Medal and a Joint Meritorious Unit Award. The Joint Service Commendation Medal I believe came from when I was in Panama, um, because we engaged in some interser- we did a lot of interservice work.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And so that was on the individual level. The Joint Meritorious Unit Award came from when I was in the Military Entrance Processing Station because the unit as a whole was working together.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, other than that, that- that was just basically saying I was a team player. And the expert pistol shot, I got that on my own because my dad had been a champion pistol shot when he was in the Army.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And I just wanted to show him that I could do it too.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: So my husband taught me how to shoot and I was qualified as expert.

HUNTLEY: I guess rattlesnakes in Arkansas and Arizona are about the same, right? [laughs]

CURTIS: I guess, I don't know.

HUNTLEY: Okay, so, what sorts of technology did you use in the service?

CURTIS: Oh, man, we were really high-tech.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: We used fax machines. Yeah, we used fax machines and type-writers.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: Mhm-hm. And we had a special communications set-up for, uh, scrambled phone mess- phone conversations.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: That was about it.

HUNTLEY: Did you know how to type going in?

CURTIS: Yeah, I- I learned how to type when I was in High School.

HUNTLEY: Oh, okay

CURTIS: On one of the old IBMs.

HUNTLEY: Um, and then what were race and/or gender relations like in your unit?

CURTIS: I don't remember any problems with any of that.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: We had- [laughs] we had, um, good relations I thought. And I was always given lots of respect but that may have been because I was an officer and they knew they'd get in trouble. I don't know. But I was always treated with respect. There were a few incidents that I can see looking back were rather sexist.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, a lot of men seemed to think if you were a woman in the military you were there for the men.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, but, at that point in my life I really didn't care. I was there just living my life, doing my thing, and sometimes I thought it was fun and sometimes I didn't. When I was in college, I spent the one summer with a summer job in the etymology department. And what we had to do was get samples of moths that were collected from all over the state and we had to dissect them and mount their genitals on a slide because they were studying which counties had the most number of infertile moths. And I remember vividly one time somebody came onto me when I was in Panama and he was somebody I was not interested in and he wouldn't leave me alone and I just looked at him one time and I said, 'Look, I spent a whole summer castrating moths, if I can find it on a moth, believe me, I can find it on you.'

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: And after that he left me alone. [laughs] That's- you know to me, race and gender relations and interpersonal relations a lot of times are just blown out- out of proportion. There are people out there that have nasty thoughts and stuff. Best thing I can say to do is if you don't like 'em stay away from 'em, if you can't stay away from 'em, report 'em or find some other way to shut 'em up. You know, castrate a moth or two.

HUNTLEY: [laughs] Yeah, people are people, right? [laughs]

CURTIS: Yeah! That's all i- if you treat people like people, they usually will come around.

HUNTLEY: Um, and then, what are your most vivid memories of your time in your service- in service?

CURTIS: The fun stuff.

HUNTLEY: [laughs] That's good.

CURTIS: Yeah, I got to ride on the USS Missouri when it was coming through the Panama Canal because Nicaragua had blown up and they were rattling sabres so the USS Missouri came through the Panama Canal and it was amazing. That ship was so big. They had to put bumpers on the sides of the canal and if you ever see a picture of the locks of the canal-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: There's a building that sits right on the edge of the locks. The roof has a hinge on the eaves. The eaves are on a hinge so it can be raised up so a big ship can go through without knocking the roof off. And they had that raised up and the Missouri came through. There was a- there's a place called the Balboa Yacht Club that's on the edge of the canal and it has a

spectacular view of- of the canal and all of that. If you're just sitting there for dinner, it's no big deal. But the- when the Missouri came through, every naval officer and enlisted person that could get off was there. And we filled up that yacht club and when the Missouri went through, we were right at the windows watching the whole thing. It was huge. And I did get to get on it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Wait a minute, was it the Missouri? No, it was the New Jersey. It was one of the two battleships.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Yeah, it was the New Jersey, I think. Whichever one it was, it was spectacular to see.

HUNTLEY: Had you ever seen that before?

CURTIS: No, I had never- I had never seen a battleship up close before.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: I had been on the Forrestal when my- when my dad was stationed at Norfolk. We went on the Forrestal but to me it was just a big boat.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: But seeing the Missouri or the New Jersey- whichever one it was. The more I think about it, the more I think it was the New Jersey. But, uh, seeing that ship, it just blew my mind how big that thing was.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, some of the other things that I thought were fun... My first war games were fun. It was shortly after I got stationed in Panama and we had a thing called Kendal Liberty. It was a war games exercise that involved all of the US forces in Panama plus their Panamanian counterparts plus reserve units from the states that came down. And the whole idea was that Panama is under attack and who's gonna defend and who's gonna play the bad guys and who's gonna play the good guys. Well, at that time, I was with the small boats unit and the tradition was that small boats unit was always the bad guys. And they worked with SEALs to be the bad guys. Well, when the SEAL commander came down to start coordinating efforts with this- with the small boats school, he walks into the office and sees me and he's going, 'hey, we got a woman on our team, they're never gonna expect that' so he's all over the fact that he's got somebody that nobody's gonna expect is gonna be a bad guy. So he got me helping him figure out where we could go for- for a safehouse where are places-

[doorbell rings, a dog barks, a handyman comes by to do some work, dog is put up, CURTIS and HUNTLEY return to their conversation- in edited version, cut]

CURTIS: So, anyway, I was- I was telling you about the war games. So I spent the first week before the war games helping the SEALs and the boat crew figure out tactical things that they were gonna need for their attacks. Well, at the end of that week, they published the list- the watchlist for all of the people that were working on the base that were not the bad guys.

HUNTLEY: Oh.

CURTIS: And my name appeared on that list as radio coordinator or something like that. [laughs] I went to the good guys commander and I said, um, I don't know if you knew this but I'm part of the boat crew, I'm on the bad guys team. And he says, no, you're a woman.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: And I said, that doesn't have anything to do with it. I'm part of that unit so I've been working with the bad guys. 'Well, we outrank the bad guys, you're on the good guys team.' He refused to take me off the good guys team. So, I'm having to do duties for the good guys. At night, after regular working hours- regular working hours, I'm working for the good- for the bad guys.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: And that when on for the whole time for the exercise until finally the last night of the

exercise that was when the Navy- the bad guys were supposed to attack the Navy station. And I had spent the entire week working on how they were gonna do it. I knew about four different places they could come in from. I knew what the target was. I knew the window they were supposed to attack. And I knew the guys that were gonna be doing the attack. I'd made friends with them by this time.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: So I know all of that going in but I'm not supposed to know any of it. And it's all supposed to happen during the time that I'm on duty at the radios that night. So, I'm on duty at the radios and all of a sudden somebody comes in and reports that somebody had seen flipper marks on one of the sandbars. 'Activate your anti-swimmer defenses, right now' 'Yes, ma'am' you know, kinda bored, okay, fine you wanna take it that way, go for it. And a little bit later somebody reports seeing bubbles off the port bow or something like that, I said, 'okay, have you got anti-swimming defenses up yet?' 'They're working on it ma'am' y'know, and a little bit later this kid comes over the line, he's- he's a young marine, obviously his first tour of duty and still his voice is still changing.

HUNTLEY: Oh

CURTIS: And he's so excited it cracks over the phone- over the radio, 'there's been big a big ass explosion down here on the pier! They got the ship, they got the ship!' And my first reaction is, 'oh my god!'

HUNTLEY: [laughs] The bad guys.

CURTIS: The bad guys. I was cheering for the bad guys. [laughs] The base commander was in the- in the radio room when that happened and he just looked at me like, 'what did you just do?' and so I explained to him what had been going on the whole week and he said, 'we'd ought to have a medal for that'

HUNTLEY & CURTIS: [laugh]

CURTIS: - and it was just weird that that would happen. That they would be that concerned and believe so strongly that nobody would ever use a woman for that position. What about Mata Hari for crying out loud? [laughs] Y'know, look through history, it's happened.

HUNTLEY: Yeah. The Bible.

[dog barks in background]

CURTIS: Yeah. [laughs] [to handyman] He knows you're still here.

HUNTLEY: Okay, so what did you like or not overall about your experience? You've talked about the things you liked. Was there anything you didn't like about?

CURTIS: The biggest thing was that I have a stubborn streak, and I was taught to think for myself and that doesn't always go well in the military.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Because you have to be able to take orders and follow orders often times without being given a reason why.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: And if you- if you can't do that you're not gonna get very far. Or you're gonna- you're gonna have times when you just question what am I doing here? You know, and that's- that was my biggest problem. That was- I didn't have the right temperament for it. I didn't have the self-discipline, um, I- anytime the PT test came up, I'm thinking, 'I work in an office for crying out loud. Why do I need to know this?'

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Y'know, but, um, it was mostly my own internal stuff. It wasn't anything necessarily about any specific instances where I was really disliking the military.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

[conversation with handyman ensues, he's done inside, dog is released, CURTIS and HUNTLEY return to the interview]

CURTIS: Okay, so where are we?

HUNTLEY: Um, yeah, so you said that mostly it was your-

[dog makes noise in background]

CURTIS: It was mostly me.

HUNTLEY: Do you think that in that your dad was right about you in the military?

CURTIS: Oh yeah.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: Yeah, he had the same problem.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: But his- his biggest- I asked him, 'why did you stay in then?' and he said, 'because by the time I figured out that I really didn't like it'

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: 'it was too late, I had- I had five kids to support and the economy was a place where I couldn't even get a job.'

HUNTLEY: Yeah. Even his having West Point he didn't mind it as much as being in the military?

CURTIS: No, he had been on- on the football team.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: He had been in the Glee Club. Very, very active in his high school level stuff.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So, he was used to the discipline and stuff. He was a very self-disciplined person in a lot of ways, but he didn't tolerate foolishness.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Very much. And he a difficult time when he thought that somebody, uh, senior to him in the ranking system was pulling something really stupid, y'know. [laughs]

HUNTLEY: Ah.

CURTIS: And he had a hard time keeping his mouth shut for stuff like that.

HUNTLEY: Alright, so, in thinking about reasons why you decided not to, uh, stay in after, um, four years, did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

CURTIS: The biggest challenge I expected to get was, um, getting a job.

HUNTLEY: Mhm.

CURTIS: And it was partly because by that time my husband and I were planning on getting married and we were going to move in together in El Paso where I had never lived before.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And El Paso at that time, and I'm sure this even to this day, jobs were kinda scarce down there because there's such a huge labor force just on the other side of the river that's willing to come in.

[dog barks in background]

CURTIS: To do a lot of lower paying jobs, so I was not expecting to get a job anytime soon.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And we moved there. He moved there in August or September.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Of '85.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And I moved there in October and neither one of us got a job until March or April.

HUNTLEY: Oh wow.

CURTIS: And we were down to our last two or three hundred dollars when I got a part-time job as a bank teller.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And then he got a job as a safety officer for the city of El Paso.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Shortly after that. After that, everything looked up. But I was expecting to have a problem getting a job.

HUNTLEY: Was there a reason why you went to El Paso?

CURTIS: Yeah, he was- he had been married before.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And his first wife had gotten the house when they got divorced.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And he wanted to move back to El Paso because he figured- he had bought some land in New Mexico and we had this dream of building our own log cabin. We were gonna live up there. Well, by the time we actually did the numbers, we'd have three dollars and eighty-five cents to last through the rest of the month for food and all the other stuff that you would kinda like to have. And so we decided we'd move to El Paso instead and we'd go up and work on the

cabin on the weekends. We never did get the cabin built but we lived in El Paso for fifteen years. But when we were starting to think about going to El Paso we were thinking about getting a house. And that's when he found that his first wife was five months behind on the mortgage.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And his name was still on it.

HUNTLEY: Uh-huh.

CURTIS: Because at the time they got the divorce interest rates were through the roof and his name was on the mortgage for a VA loan. And if she got the house, and the mortgage it would have to be refinanced at the higher interest rate so he left it on there as a favor to her so he wouldn't have to do that. And because it was five months behind on the mortgage, it was about to be repossessed.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So he bought her interest out and we moved into that house.

HUNTLEY: Okay. I guess there was one thing that follows.

CURTIS: Yeah.

HUNTLEY: Um, let's see. Did you face any- so I guess other than employment did you face challenges-

CURTIS: No

HUNTLEY: -when you returned to civilian life?

CURTIS: No,

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: I think what you're asking there is, uh, was there any challenges because of my military service.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: No.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Um, being a woman in the military back then was still different enough that, um, biggest challenge I had was if people found out that I was in the military they'd begin with, they'd say- they'd ask questions about it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And sometimes the questions I- [laughs] my first reaction would be, 'huh?' [laughs] Why would you ask something like that? Because it never occurred to me that that would be so different from-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -what they were experiencing.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: But I grew up in the military so I wasn't, I never had any problems with it.

HUNTLEY: Yeah. Um, let's see so how did your service, um, influence or affect your family?

CURTIS: Well, my husband and I never had kids.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: He had kids with his first wife but not with me. Um, so as far as that kind of family, it didn't affect them. My dad was proud of me, my mom was proud of me, and I got to swear my brother into the Navy.

HUNTLEY: Oh, that's so cool. In Memphis?

CURTIS: No, he was in Little Rock, going to Med School.

HUNTLEY: Okay. That's your brother?

CURTIS: Yeah, and the Navy was willing to pay for his Med School.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: If he joined the Navy.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So I went over there to Little Rock and met him in Little Rock and I administered the oath to him.

HUNTLEY: That's your youngest brother?

CURTIS: That's my youngest brother.

HUNTLEY: The one who nobody knew he could talk until your sister want- [laughs]

CURTIS: Yeah. It was kinda funny when we were growing up we called my mom Mammy and it was a nickname we just called her Mammy. And sometime around the time he was learning to talk, he kept hearing people talk about mommy or momma.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: And he didn't know who momma was.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: But I took care of him sometimes. I was eight years older than him. I took care of him sometimes. So he started calling me Momma when I'm eight years old. And that came to a screeching halt when he did it in the equivalent of WalMart back in those days. [laughs]
Anyway, we were- we were always really close. So I swore him in. He ended up serving twenty years.

HUNTLEY: Oh wow, did any of your other siblings serve?

CURTIS: Uh-uh.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: No, my sister, the one did his talking for him, she married an Air Force officer.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But uh, nobody else did.

HUNTLEY: Okay. And then, for, hm, do you think that- so your- how long did your husband serve in the military?

CURTIS: Twenty-two years.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: He started off, um, as an enlisted man in the [pause] I don't remember- Signal Corps.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Signal Corps. He put up communications towers.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: All over the world. But, he had a wife and three kids and according to him, he had the world's worst Mother-in-Law. And because of his job sending him to Bolivia and Iran and all over the world setting up these towers. He was away from home a lot.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And it was causing a strain on his marriage so he got out for a couple of years and discovered that he hated screwing the same four screws into telephones on an assembly line all the time.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: So he went back into the military and he- I don't know what he was assigned to originally, uh, but it was during the time that Vietnam was just starting to heat up and so he's stationed in Korea and his description of it was that his job was to march up and down this ridgeline on the DMZ watching for bad guys coming up the hill. And he- he basically marched up and down the same however long the distance was and periodically during the day, he had to do a radio check. And he said that it was cold, the wind was always blowing and it was just horrible duty but everyday this helicopter would fly in and it would land just below the ridgeline where there was one of those big army tents that had a stove in it.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: There was fire. He could see the fire and the smoke coming out of it. So he said, one day he just broke the- broke the rules because he was jealous. These guys would fly in, they'd go into the tent, they'd stay there all day long and then they'd fly off and that's what they did all day.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: So one day he broke the rules and he walked down to the tent and he asked them, 'what do I have to do to get your job?'

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: Well they knew that if they could get somebody else to fly the helicopters, they were gonna send the new guys to Vietnam instead of the old guys. Cause the old guys are gonna be training them.

HUNTLEY: Right.

CURTIS: So, if he's a new pilot, he gets to go, and they get to stay home.

HUNTLEY: Oh.

CURTIS: So they did everything they could to get him into the helicopter school. And he ended up becoming a Warrant Officer and went as high as he could go in the military. But that was his track-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -in life. But-

HUNTLEY: So he was in from the early 60s to the mid 80s?

CURTIS: He was in- in there 'til 1984.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: He went in the first time in '62. Got out, started up again a year or two later.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And he ended up in Vietnam in '69-'70.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: And then after that he was stationed all over Texas and Alaska and places like that.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: He was a hunter, a fisherman, a rockhound, very much the outdoorsy kinda guy.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Yeah.

HUNTLEY: Was his family a military family too?

CURTIS: Not really. Um, his family were mostly Mormons.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And they worked in the mines and, um, in Southeast Arizona they were farmers and stuff like that. Um, he did have an uncle that served in World War II. Um, he was killed on New Zealand. Uh, but other than that. I don't think he had anybody.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: No, wait a minute. He had- he had another uncle that served- he had a couple of uncles that served in the military. Um, in the Army during World War II.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But that was it, I mean it wasn't a big deal in their family.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But back in those days people were more pro-military and more- I'd like to say patriotic, I don't know if that's true or not, but they were more willing to jump in and do something.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: Then they seem to be today.

HUNTLEY: Yeah, well military service was probably more common then than it is now.

CURTIS: Mhm-hm. And it was viewed as a way up.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: On the social scale.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Um, and I think if people thought about it, it could still be viewed that way.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Because you can get training in the military as your job.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And so you're getting paid to get trained there instead of going to a trade school and pay somebody else to train you the same stuff. Um, my brother for instance became a doctor-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -through the military. Med School's not cheap, you know? And he didn't have to pay for it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Except for the time that he was required to serve the military for getting that training.

HUNTLEY: Right.

CURTIS: You know, so, if people were taught that to start.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Then yeah, I'd think there'd be more people willing to serve in the military. But back in- in the days of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Well, Vietnam not really, but up at least through Korea-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -that was viewed as a way to get something so that you could better your life. And you could do it in four years.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Or six years. Or two years. You could get that training and get out as a civilian and start earning bigger bucks as a civilian and not have to pay off student loans.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. Yeah.

CURTIS: You know, and so that's how he viewed and that's what he did.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: If he hadn't done that, he would've been a miner's kid.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: You know, and his job would have probably been working in the mines.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And he didn't see that as- as a very good option for himself.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So he went military.

HUNTLEY: Um, so how well do you think communities in West Texas or other communities that you've been a part of have treated returning veterans?

CURTIS: Most of the places that I've lived have been, um, places that have had military-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -units assigned close to 'em.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So like, Goodfellow here. El Paso had Fort Bliss. Um, Memphis had Millington Naval Station. Most of the communities that I have been in as a civilian sense since I was in the military have been very pro-military.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And very respectful of veterans.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So I have never experienced anything bad from the military.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm. Even growing up?

CURTIS: Even growing up.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: Yeah, cause when I was growing up I was- the only civilian things I had access to really was really at my grandparents.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And a few places where the base didn't have a school for kids so you went to a civilian school, but-

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: -that's school is dependent on having those military kids there too. So, you know, those communities were usually pro-military because that's one of biggest employers in town.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: So it made sense but-

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: -I don't think I've ever lived anywhere where people didn't respect the military. I've

never had anybody say anything bad to me because I served in the military. They've always been admiring, if anything.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: You know, but, I've never had any bad experiences from that at all.

HUNTLEY: Um, let's- do you think that means- did your dad or your husband had any stories about being returning Vietnam vets?

CURTIS: From Vietnam?

HUNTLEY: Yeah. I'm just curious.

CURTIS: Um, I don't remember my dad saying anything about it but I remember my mom after his first tour apparently, something happened over there that he never told us kids about and I don't know if he ever told my mom all of it.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: But I do remember [laughs] one time when we were in Panama and this was several years after he had come back from his first tour and before he did the second tour. But [laughs]

She woke up in the middle of the night and he's sitting on her, straddling her waist and stuff and pounding the pillow as hard as he could.

HUNTLEY: Oh, wow.

CURTIS: In his sleep. Yeah, and saying I'm gonna kill you, you SOB.

HUNTLEY: Oh, no.

CURTIS: So she said, 'I have no idea what he was dreaming about' but she says that she said just as calmly as she could, 'Honey, Blair, wake up, wake up.' [laughs]

HUNTLEY: Oh, wow.

CURTIS: But apparently something must have happened there.

HUNTLEY: Yeah. And they don't give- when service members return they don't give them any sort of this is what you do when this scenario happens.

CURTIS: Um, no, that was available but-

HUNTLEY: Yeah

CURTIS: That was the only time my mom ever said anything about it.

HUNTLEY: Okay.

CURTIS: She just- she mentioned it to me 'cause I asked her why she looked like she was so tired. [laughs]

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

CURTIS: And she told me what had happened but by that time, I was- I was a teenager, almost adult.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: And she was used to talking to me on a different level than my brothers and sisters. But, um, I don't remember anything like that but it was interesting in a way because when my dad died we went back to his hometown for scattering his ashes and as we were going through his stuff, helping my mom clear things out we discovered just what of a pack rat he was. He had had diaries that you used to get from the Boy Scouts, little tiny things about that big. They gave you about two lines to write anything in. He had those going back from the time he was eight years old.

HUNTLEY: Oh, wow.

CURTIS: And then when he became an adult, he started getting those day-minder things and he had those from the time he was an adult to the time he died.

HUNTLEY: Yeah.

CURTIS: And we went through 'em and cherry-picked some of the quotes but one of the things that all of us noticed was during his time in Vietnam, there was a- a little two line entry that said that major so-and-so chewed me out for something, it wasn't- chewed me out it was not my fault. That's all that was said. But it very clearly from the way he worded it, very very clearly upset him.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm.

CURTIS: And I remember my mom saying that somebody had put a black mark on his record and he was never gonna get promoted higher than Lieutenant Colonel and he knew that. But other than that, I don't know if sh-

[audio cuts out because of a full SD card] [end of transcript]